

It is all about being happy in search of security

A pledge for equal treatment of refugees and
economic migrants

PROF. DR. IBRAHIM SIRKECI — 7 November, 2016



Migration recently has been discussed in a very negative context. As Europe and the US moved towards right, we have to rethink human mobility and push for informed debates. Terminology used to describe migration and refugees is old, out dated and problematic. They were largely designed for the Cold War era and for a special category of people. The 1951 Geneva Convention had set the ground rules for treating refugees. Then, economic growth was the dominant character with clear need for foreign labour as Germany and other European countries signed multiple bilateral labour

exchange agreements with the countries in the South to recruit millions of “guest workers” from the 1950s till the early 1970s.

Nevertheless, today, these countries are marked by after effects of a recent global financial crisis and characterised by very slow growth and limited employment opportunities. Although there is still great need for foreign labour in certain sectors and shortage occupations, the demand is very limited. At the same time, relatively peaceful period after the WWII has long gone. There are major armed conflicts on going in many parts of the world such as in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq while at the same time significant economic and political inequalities, which are evident in many countries have added fuel to migration pressures. Hence a new thinking is needed to understand and address the challenges today.

Numbers grew but remained negligible

Although the number of international migrants including refugees has almost tripled since the 1960s, 244 million migrants represent still just about 3.3% of the world population of 7.3 billion as of Summer 2016. At the end of 2015, the number of displaced people had peaked at 65.3 million, 21.3 million of whom were refugees. Despite the grave and urgent need for humanitarian protection in the case of refugees and internally displaced persons, there is no reason to separate them from international migrants as they share the same needs such as shelter, food, job, opportunities, education, health and so on. Thus the dichotomy of refugee versus economic migrant is a false one. People move in search of security. Whether it might be

economic, political, cultural, environmental, or personal security.

Terminology matters

When Jeffrey Cohen and I set to write our book Cultures of Migration in 2005, one pressing concern for us was the negative connotations associated with the mainstream migration terminology. A decade later, immigrant and migration are still representing the “evil” against good. Anti-immigration and racist discourses are common on both sides of the Atlantic.

The terminology suffers from a neo-liberal fallacy about human mobility. The problem here is that once you place too much emphasis on the individual agent as a rational decision maker who often focused on economics of the origin and destinations, you are likely to get a distorted picture of contemporary human mobility. In this perspective, migration is often described with a focus on positive outcomes tied to destinations such as higher wages, quality education, welfare benefits and so on. It is true that people who move do want to be happy or happier. Since they often go through and face negative circumstances, which they perceive as insecurity at the origin and this is what drives mobility rather than positive outcomes at the destination. “While many movers typically talk about their hopes and dreams, their decisions are often made around a present that they are trying to escape as well as a future that they cannot describe”. Hence people only begin thinking about destinations and what can be available there for them once they are clearly convinced of the environment of insecurity at home.

Cultures of Migration and Conflict Model

The conflict-migration nexus is more obvious in cases like Syria today, however, as we define conflict in a very wide sense here, it applies to most migration decisions. The model originally draws upon research on migration from Turkey, migration from Iraq, migration from Mexico, and more recently it is clearly applicable to Syrian migration. It also integrates the cumulative causation model of Doug Massey.

The key premises of the cultures of migration and conflict model of migration are as follows:

- 1) Nobody moves when they are comfortable where they are and content with what they have. Population movements are almost always triggered by some discomfort, tension, disagreements, conflicts, absence or paucity of resources and/or opportunities, wars and the like.
- 2) When there are armed conflicts, civil wars and/or wars, mass movements occur.
- 3) Environment of insecurity is what individuals, households or groups perceive in a subjective fashion. Therefore, even if we can identify many conflicts and issues in a given place, it does not necessarily mean all people living in that place would be moving.
- 4) Even when there is a clear perception of an environment of insecurity, only some people move because human mobility is a self-selective and costly process and only those able and with necessary means can move. These qualifiers can be categorised into (a) human capital, (b) social capital, (c) financial capital, (d) physical and psychological ability to move.

5) Migration experience is often built within households, communities, groups, and places. This means, even when the initial triggers of migration disappear out-migration can continue. In fact, over time, migration corridors turn to carry two way flows and transnational living arrangements emerge. Cultures of migration emerge and influence the ways in which people move.

Moving away from pejorative meanings of migration, immigration, migrants and the like is easy to understand. The rest of the story is more complicated and nuanced. Mobility and movement are neutral terms and they reflect the dynamic nature of human migration. This is clearer within the conflict model, as people move and continue to move at the face of conflicts, which change, appear and fade away over time and space.

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